# THE

# MOTHER OF LINCOLN.

BY

HOWARD M. JENKINS.

*Reprinted from the Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, July, 1900.*

PHILADELPHIA.
1900.

# THE

# MOTHER OF LINCOLN.

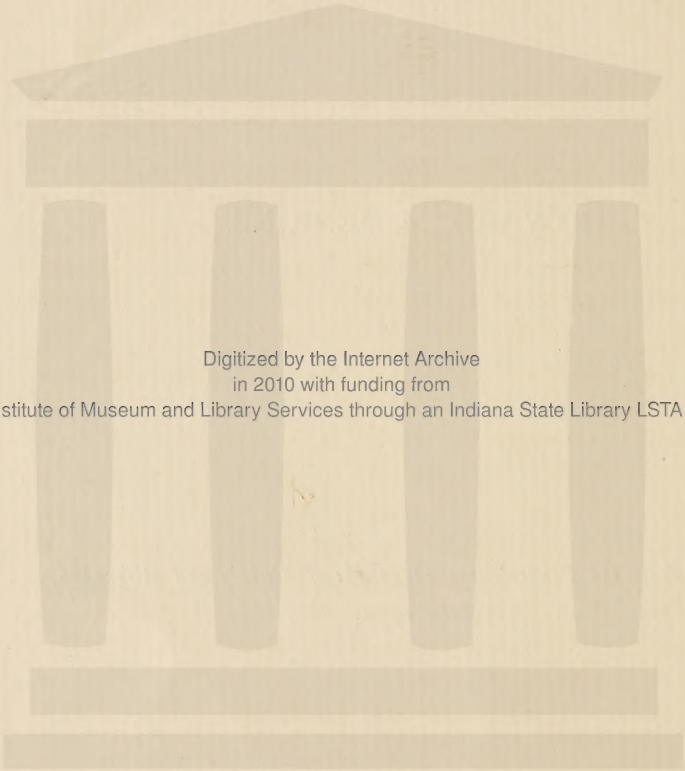
BY

HOWARD M. JENKINS.

*Reprinted from the Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, July, 1900.*

PHILADELPHIA.

1900.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010 with funding from
The Institute of Museum and Library Services through an Indiana State Library LSTA Grant

https://archive.org/details/motheroflincoln00jenk

# THE MOTHER OF LINCOLN.

From time to time the superiority of record evidence over tradition, and of documentary proof over gossip and legend, is strikingly presented. We have now an interesting instance in the case of Abraham Lincoln's parentage. There has been extant, ever since the career of Lincoln and every detail connected with him became the subject of sympathetic interest on the part of his countrymen, a supposition that his mother was not of legitimate birth. This, indeed, has not been treated as a supposition: it has been circumstantially and positively asserted in some of the most authoritative biographies. In W. H. Herndon's "Life" of Lincoln he relates the story of illegitimacy as coming from Lincoln himself in an isolated and notable conversation, and J. T. Morse has cited this with full assurance in his "Life," in the "American Statesmen" series. Other biographers allude to and recognize the tale, and it has no doubt been generally received and credited.

Now, it is plain that there is no truth whatever in this story. Nancy Hanks was not the daughter of "Lucy" Hanks, as Herndon so positively says; in fact, it is not clear that there ever was such a person as Lucy Hanks. Nor was Nancy the daughter of any unmarried woman. On the contrary, her family record is unimpeachable, her birth is without a cloud, the evil story concerning her is apparently a pure invention—not a pure invention, either, but an impure, a base slander, derived from some vulgar and scandalous source. If Lincoln ever told such a story to

Herndon—which may be confidently disbelieved—he was mistaken, and must have been misled by some evil whisper that had been unhappily brought to his ears.[1]

The little book, "Nancy Hanks," by Mrs. Caroline Hanks Hitchcock, of Cambridge, Massachusetts, published in 1899 (New York: Doubleday & McClure Co.), is the source of the knowledge which sets right this story of illegitimacy. It distinctly and conclusively shows who the mother of Lincoln was. It identifies both her parents. It proves them reputable people. It places her in the list of their children, with full title to respect.

There is other matter in Mrs. Hitchcock's book, some of which is entitled to our consideration also, but this in relation to the parentage of Abraham Lincoln's mother is by far the most important. Mrs. Hitchcock has found (at Bardstown, Kentucky, the introduction to her book states) a document, heretofore unprinted, which is conclusive as to this point. She gives complete, both in type and in photographic fac-simile, the will of Joseph Hanks. He was of Nelson County, Kentucky. His will is dated January 9, 1793, and was duly probated in that county, May 14, of the same year. In his will Joseph Hanks names his eight children. There were five sons, Thomas, Joshua, William, Charles, and Joseph, and three daughters, Elizabeth, Polly, and *Nancy*. The will provides for them all, and remembers equally the three girls. It thus records the father's impartial gifts:

"ITEM.—I give and bequeath unto my daughter Elizabeth one heifer yearling called Gentle. ITEM.—I give and bequeath unto my daughter Polly one heifer yearling called Lady. ITEM.—I give and bequeath unto my daughter Nancy one heifer yearling called Peidy."

We have here in Nelson County, Kentucky, in the year 1793, Nancy Hanks, daughter of Joseph. That she was the same who thirteen years later, June 12, 1806, was

[1] The genesis of the idea of illegitimate birth was made easier by imperfect knowledge of the relationships of Nancy Hanks's family.

married by the Rev. Jesse Head, the Methodist preacher, to Thomas Lincoln, is not open to question. She is fully identified by abundant proof.

Joseph Hanks had been in Kentucky, prior to his death, only about four years. He had come, it is said, from Amelia County, Virginia. Following now Mrs. Hitchcock's general account, his wife was Nancy (she is called "Nanny" in the will), and she was the daughter of Robert Shipley.[1] The wife of Robert Shipley, Mrs. Hitchcock says, was named Sarah Rachael. They were in Lunenburg County, Virginia, in 1765, where Robert Shipley bought land, three hundred and fourteen acres, September 16, of that year. Lunenburg County is near to Amelia County,[2] in which Joseph Hanks is said to have lived before his removal to Kentucky.

The Shipleys had five daughters. These and their marriages, as given by Mrs. Hitchcock, were:

1. Mary. She married Abraham Lincoln, of Rockingham County, Virginia (son of John Lincoln, who had come from Berks County, Pennsylvania). She was thus the mother of Thomas Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln removed to Kentucky with his family, and was killed there by Indians, 1784.

2. Lucy. She married Richard Berry. They removed to Kentucky, probably in 1789, with Joseph Hanks and others. Lucy Berry, after the death of her sister Nancy, the wife of Joseph Hanks, which occurred soon after the death of Joseph, "brought up" her niece, Nancy Hanks. Richard Berry was the bondsman for Thomas Lincoln in his marriage to Nancy Hanks. The marriage took place at Richard Berry's house, at Beechland, near Springfield, in Washington County, Kentucky. It is this Lucy—Berry—who

[1] This is the statement also of Mr. Samuel Shackford, in his paper on Lincoln's ancestry, in the *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, April, 1887. He describes Robert Shipley, however, as of North Carolina.

[2] Mrs. Hitchcock says "the next county." It is not now so, Nottoway County lying between.

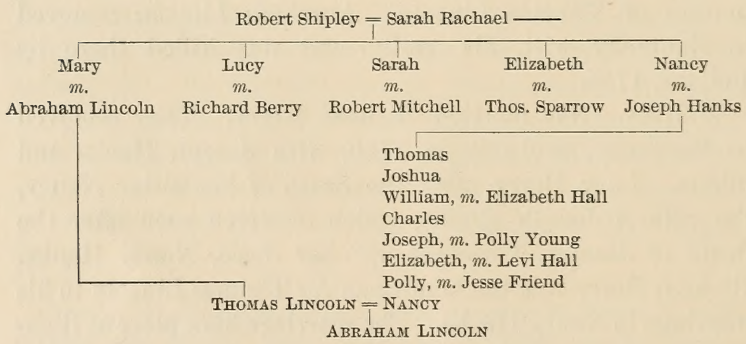
has been called in several of the biographies of Lincoln "Lucy Hanks," it being supposed, through the mists of dim recollection, that Nancy Hanks was actually her daughter by blood, and not merely by adoption.

3. SARAH. She married Robert Mitchell; they removed to Kentucky.

4. ELIZABETH. She married Thomas Sparrow. This family also went to Kentucky, and in the accounts of those who remembered the Lincolns and the Hankses there are many allusions to the Sparrows.

5. NANCY. She married Joseph Hanks, referred to above. His will identifies her. "I give and bequeath to my wife Nanny all and singular my whole estate during her life, afterward to be equally divided between all my children . . . . I constitute, ordain, and appoint my wife Nanny and my son William as executrix and executor to this my last will and testament."

DESCENT OF NANCY HANKS.




It will be observed that Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks were first cousins—he the son of Mary Shipley, and she the daughter of Nancy Shipley. I am not aware that this fact has heretofore been distinctly brought out.

Mrs. Hitchcock's book not only gives in fac-simile the will of Joseph Hanks, but also, in fac-simile, three documents which relate to the marriage of Thomas Lincoln and

Nancy Hanks, and which fix the time and the place, as well as the fact, beyond cavil. These are (1) the marriage bond given by Thomas Lincoln and Richard Berry, June 10, 1806, two days before the marriage; (2) the marriage certificate of Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks, signed by Rev. Jesse Head; (3) the "return list" of marriages sent in to the court clerk by Rev. Jesse Head, dated April 22, 1807, and containing with fifteen others the marriage of Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks, on the date already given.

The second of these documents, as numbered above, is new, so far as I am aware. The marriage bond and the "return list" were both printed in fac-simile in Nicolay and Hay's "Life" of Lincoln, but not the certificate. Mrs. Hitchcock does not state where or when it was brought to light; she mentions that "gradually the documents [relating to the marriage] were unearthed, owing largely to the efforts of Mrs. Vauter [? Vawter] and Mr. Thompson, of Louisville, Kentucky." The certificate is, of course, cumulative testimony; the return list, taken with the bond, was already conclusive on the fact of the marriage.

The relationship of Nancy Hanks to Joseph Hanks, the carpenter, of Elizabethtown, with whom Thomas Lincoln "learned his trade," is made clear by the list of children in the will of the Joseph Hanks of 1793. The Joseph of 1806 was evidently his son, the youngest of the five in the will. He was the brother of Nancy, and, like her, first cousin to Thomas Lincoln.[1]

[1] Nicolay and Hay say (Vol. I., p. 23), "he [Thomas Lincoln] married Nancy Hanks, a niece of his employer." They add that "Mrs. Lincoln's mother was named Lucy Hanks; her sisters were Betty, Polly, and Nancy, who married Thomas Sparrow, Jesse Friend, and Levi Hall." There is no little confusion in these statements, but it may be readily corrected by a reference to the diagram given above with the text. The foster mother of Nancy Hanks was Lucy (Shipley) Berry, her aunt. Betty Sparrow was her aunt as stated; Polly Friend was her sister; Nancy, sister of Lucy Berry, was her own mother, not the wife

Mrs. Hitchcock gives a page or two to a defence of the character of Thomas Lincoln. Probably this will be unavailing, but it is no doubt just. The figure of Thomas Lincoln, as presented in most of the biographies of his son, is a caricature. In the earlier ones he appears as a good-humored, indolent, and incapable person, but later ones, enlarging and dilating upon this, represent him as coarse, uncouth, and altogether worthless. Out of this there grew a vulgar and scandalous idea that Thomas Lincoln could not have been the father of so great a son.[1]

A very moderate application of common sense to the subject will show that the ordinary notion adverse to Thomas Lincoln is unreasonable. The known facts concerning him show him to have been a man of his class, a hardy and energetic pioneer, meeting resolutely the trials and difficulties that faced him, and contending with them with fair success. Let us consider briefly some of these. (1) He learned a trade, that of a carpenter. (2) He took up a quarter section of land (on Nolin's Creek), which it is testified was "a fair representative section of the land in the immediate region." Coffin, who saw it in 1890, says it was then under cultivation, and yielding an average crop. (3) His second purchase of land (Knob's Creek) had "many

of Levi Hall, but of Joseph Hanks; Levi Hall's wife was the Elizabeth of the younger generation, Nancy's sister.

The confusion in Nicolay and Hay at this point is presented also in Herndon, who pretended to have such a competent knowledge. He says in a foot-note, "Dennis and John Hanks have always insisted that Lincoln's mother was not a Hanks but a Sparrow. Both of them wrote to me that such was the fact. Their object in insisting on this is apparent when it is shown that Nancy Hanks was the daughter of Lucy Hanks, who afterwards married Henry Sparrow. It will be observed [however] that Mr. Lincoln claimed that his mother was a Hanks."

[1] This myth, not much admitted into print, exists orally and in manuscript. A lady prominent in literature, and otherwise well known, earnestly cautioned the writer of this, some years ago, not to investigate the parentage of Lincoln. Yet, as we see, investigation was precisely the thing needed.

acres that are very fertile."[1] (4) He resolved to move to a State with free labor. (5) He sold out his Kentucky land without loss. (6) Though his boat was overset in the river, he recovered his property. (7) He sought out good land in Indiana. (8) He travelled seventy miles to Vincennes to enter his new claim. (9) Through the winter he hewed the timber for his new cabin.

As to his acuteness and his perception of character, certainly the selections he made when seeking both his first and second wives stand to his credit. Both Nancy Hanks and Sally Bush are described by all as women of exceptional qualities. There were, it may be added, a Bible and other books in the Indiana cabin, and Thomas apparently wrote his own name, without a "mark," to the marriage bond of 1806.

The temptation to "heighten the effect," to paint with vivid colors, in popular biographies, is very strong, and it results in most unjustified and misleading—often very unfair —work. In the case of Thomas Lincoln I have not a particle of doubt that the received picture of him is thoroughly wrong.

Mrs. Hitchcock announces that a full genealogy of the Hanks family is in preparation. In her present volume she sketches what she believes to be the ancestry of Joseph Hanks, the father of Lincoln's mother, and in this I am obliged to confess a particular interest. It was suggested in my book relating to the township of Gwynedd, Pennsylvania, that it might very probably be that Nancy Hanks was descended from a family of Hanke, or Hank, in the region near Philadelphia, one of whom, John, died in Whitemarsh, 1730–31, another of whom was in Berks County, in the neighborhood of the Lincolns, about 1754, and one of whom, perhaps Joseph, is said to have gone to Virginia with John Lincoln, grandfather of the President. This theory

[1] C. C. Coffin,—who adds: "It would seem that his selections of land cannot with justice be cited as evidence of inefficiency or want of judgment."

was supported by a number of facts, and seemed to me very reasonable. I had hoped that in time the finding of further documentary evidence might establish its correctness. Meanwhile, Nicolay and Hay have recognized its probability in their work, and Coffin has adopted it more completely than anything I had said on the subject would quite justify.

Mrs. Hitchcock has, however, an entirely different line of descent. She does not come back to Pennsylvania at all; she has a Massachusetts immigrant ancestor for the Kentucky Hankses. Here is the line she offers:

I. Benjamin Hanks, from England (probably Malmesbury, in Wilts), who, with others, landed in Plymouth, Massachusetts, 1699, and settled in Pembroke, Plymouth County. "Among the parish records of Rev. Daniel Lewis," Mrs. Hitchcock has found the list of his children, eleven by a first wife and one by a second. The third one was—

II. William, born in Pembroke, Plymouth County, February 11, 1704. Of him, beyond his birth, there is no further record. Mrs. Hitchcock accepts family tradition that he went on a sailing-vessel to Virginia, and settled "near the mouth of the Rappahannock River, where his sons, Abraham, Richard, James, John, and Joseph, were born."

III. Joseph. Mrs. Hitchcock says all of William's children, named above, "with the exception of John, moved to Amelia County, Virginia, where they bought large plantations near each other," and adds that "Joseph must have moved to Amelia County, with the rest, about 1740." She proceeds then to identify him as the same Joseph Hanks who was in Nelson County, Kentucky, in 1793, and who made his will and died there that year.

We must see more of the evidence which Mrs. Hitchcock may be presumed to have, and which we suppose she will print in her larger book, before a definite judgment can be passed on this Massachusetts derivation of Lincoln's mother. But we may fairly examine a moment what is now offered.

There is record evidence, it seems, that a Joseph Hanks was in Amelia County, Virginia, much earlier than the time

of the removal to Kentucky. A person of that name sold land there in 1747, and bought other land in 1754. The records of these transactions Mrs. Hitchcock found in Richmond. The sale in 1747 was 284 acres "on the lower side of Seller Creek," to Abraham Hanks, presumed to be Joseph's brother. The purchase in 1754 was a Crown grant of 246 acres "on the upper side of Sweathouse Creek," adjoining land of Abraham Hanks and others.

There are some weak places, certainly, in this chain. The "family traditions" concerning William need support. His migration from Plymouth to tidewater Virginia, and his location "near the mouth of the Rappahannock River," seem vague and uncertain. But, accepting them as correct, was William's son, Joseph, the same person as he whose will showed him to be Nancy Hanks's father? It is a long gap in time—and a long distance as well—between an authenticated date in Massachusetts in 1704 and another in Kentucky in 1793.

One thing seems tolerably plain. The Joseph Hanks who sold land in Amelia County in 1747 cannot have been the son of William, born in 1704. There is not enough time. Forty-three years is not sufficient for William to grow up, marry, and have a fifth child of competent age for making title to land. If we suppose William to marry at the early age of twenty, in 1724, and suppose his fifth child to be born in six years,—most unlikely,—that would make Joseph's birth in 1730, and in 1747 he would legally only be an "infant," seventeen years old. Certainly, unless some of Mrs. Hitchcock's dates, or other of her data, are wrong, it is very difficult to suppose that the Joseph Hanks of 1747 is the son of William Hanks, born in 1704. And, if this be conceded, the question follows, Was the Joseph of 1754 William's son? The two Josephs who sold and bought land in the one county, 1747 and 1754, were probably the the same person, so if one was not William's son the other was not.

If, however, these difficulties are disposed of, the question

next arises, Can the Joseph Hanks of 1754 be the same whose daughter, Nancy, was born in 1784? In such a case thirty years is a good while. Mrs. Hitchcock says that it was on the tract bought in 1754 "he [Joseph] then settled, and all his children were born." If he acquired it for a home, being then married, or about to marry, it is unlikely, though possible, that even his youngest child would be born thirty years after—of one wife. Again, Robert Shipley is stated to have bought his land in Lunenburg County in 1765—eleven years after Joseph Hanks's purchase of 1754 in Amelia County. Are we to infer that Joseph did not marry Mary Shipley until her father bought this land? Joseph would be in 1765, if of age in 1754, a bachelor of at least thirty-one years—quite a contrast to the early marriage of his father which we are obliged to assume in order to make Joseph of age in 1754.

I have no desire to argue any question with Mrs. Hitchcock, nor to throw discredit on her work, in which all who care for the Lincoln family-tree are interested. The contribution she makes concerning Joseph Hanks of 1793 is—as has been said—highly important. It is to be hoped that her full account of the Hanks family in America will make all the now obscure points perfectly plain. I cannot entirely give up, as yet, the idea of the connection of the Hanke people in Pennsylvania with the Lincolns. That appears to rest on a good foundation at some points, if it should prove to be unfounded as to the vital one—the parentage of Nancy Hanks.

71.2009.024.04045